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ABSTRACT

Two views of coherence in written discourse can be analyzed and then blended into a theory of coherence that selects the best of both views. One view is H. Miller's observation that all coherences are tentative and that the composing process is richer than its products. Another view is A. D. Van Nostrand's suggestion that the two elementary activities that are necessary to the generation of discourse (retrieving information and making assertions about that information) are "natural" and function prior to the imposition of compositional constraints. A third view sees these two activities as depending not only on syntactic constraints but also on the whole system of conventions that make up the writing process. Coherence results from the strategic manipulation of constraints as it is manifested in the effort to devise plausible sequences of assertions. Constraints include such things as the writer's purpose, the reciprocal connection between retrieving information and making assertions, acceptable relationships between assertions, and the sense of entailment that principally enables coherence by insuring that writer and reader alike perceive the logic of interconnection that animates discourse. The coherence of any one pattern of assertions, which is the achievement of artifice, conveys a believable fiction about the validity of its interrelationships. The coherence is artificial because of the many possibilities that have been eliminated to preserve intellectual, imaginative, and structural consistencies. The ability to discover new connections holds a promise that keeps every writer looking beyond previous sentences and previous ways of seeing things. (AEA)

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# CONSTRAINTS ON THE WRITING PROCESS: A THEORY OF COHERENCE

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# Constraints on the Writing Process: A Theory of Coherence

In an essay titled "Reflections on Writing," which appears in his book, The Wisdom of the Heart, Henry Miller offers a subtle and revealing intuition about the effort to achieve verbal coherence and the quality of the resulting artifacts:

> I began in absolute chaos and darkness, in a bog or swamp of ideas and emotions and experiences... I am a man telling the story of his life, a process which appears more and more inexhaustible as I go on. Like the world-evolution it is endless. It is a turning inside out, a voyaging through X dimensions, with the result that somewhere along the way one discovers that what one has to tell is not nearly so important as the telling itself... From the very beginning almost I was deeply aware that there is no goal. I never hope to embrace the whole, but merely to give in each separate fragment, each work, the feeling of the whole as I go on, because I am digging deeper and deeper into life, digging deeper and deeper into past and future.

What is striking about these remarks is Miller's sense of the partial and fragmentary quality, and therefore the insufficiency, of any "finished" discourse, any achieved coherence. The process of discovering significance, he has learned, is finally more valuable than any complex of meanings preserved as "text." The process has about it an inexhaustible energy that forever denies closure, while the texts that derive from it are static artifacts, complete but flawed, permanent but merely historical, left behind as the writer proceeds to further discourse in search of a more satisfying or more comprehensive approximation of what he meant to say.

Coherence, in Miller's intriguing phrase, is that "feeling of the whole" which a discourse conveys as the best available record of a struggle to encompass something else, presumably larger, that has somehow escaped verbal paraphrase. We may resist the myth of an ultimate text that lies, like the Holy Grail, just beyond a writer's grasp, but Miller's argument about the necessary incompleteness of discourse need not be suspect because

of its romantic formulation. Coherence, we might say, is what a writer settles for at that point where the complexities of insight yield to the constraints of language. Its achievement is to render articulate, and therefore intelligible, the welter of images, thoughts, and experiences that comprise a writer's awareness of the world. Its limitation, however, lies in the misleading quality of its permanence: for the writer's intent is both realized and distorted in the process of articulation. The coherence of a text conveys a fiction about its certitude and comprehensiveness: it is a trick that writers play on readers, enticing them to actualize meanings that are only partial and potential within the discourse. It stimulates an impression of finished business, causing us to forget that the writing has started and ended arbitrarily, that something more, or less, or different could easily have been said. A discourse implies, therefore, within its pleasingly contrived and interrelated assertions, a plausibility that conceals its own essential tentativeness beneath rhetorical and linguistic artifice. Any text, to the extent that it achieves coherence, offers us both more than we started with and less than we were after.

I choose, with Miller, to emphasize the strategic and unstable nature of coherence in order to account for some basic features of the action of composing. The impulse to reformulate, to qualify and extend in response to a perception of insufficiency, lies at the heart of the writing process. It motivates the elaboration of successive sentences in a paragraph or assertions in a line of reasoning. It prompts the revision of earlier drafts and leads to the generation of new texts. In the broadest terms, it stimulates the perpetual rewriting of philosophy and literature and law, indeed the movement of any cultural institution that depends on verbal embodiment. Writing is eternally renovative, progressively shaping,

testing, and revising its statements. It is intrinsically subversive as earlier coherences are sabotaged in the context of additional information or improved insight.

This subversiveness is deeply implicit in composing. Writing aspires to translate the complexities of experience into plausible statements about its significance. But the translation entails reduction as well, as diversity and intricacy of idea are modified to allow the comprehensibility of a text. A sentence, for example, is only an argument about the information it relates within its structures: alternative formulations are invariably possible. In the same way, all discourse is argumentative because choices must be made about what to include and what priorities to enforce. The saying of one thing constrains the saying of something else; one focus of attention precludes another. Some assertions must occur first, some later, in the linear sequence that writing requires, and there is nothing inevitable about the hierarchies and emphases selected. The laws of the medium, in other words, restrict the options for expression: their effective application guarantees coherence; but it also insures the reductive, hence inadequate, character of any resulting discourse. The paradox of verbal expression is that the very processes that enable coherence work simultaneously to undermine its reliability.

Recent scholarship has made it fashionable to call these laws of the medium "constraints," without which discourse could not occur. The writing process manifests itself as a system of constraints that define strategies and predict the shapes of texts. That is to say, they prescribe the limits of coherence, the range of intelligible options, linguistic, stylistic, logical, and rhetorical, from which a writer can make choices.

Some of them are deeply embedded and resistant to change, for example, the syntactic patterns of a given language. These patterns require the distribution of information in certain modes of relationship: subject-object, agent-action, cause-effect, primary-subordinate, past-present-future, among others. They restrict the movement of discourse to recurring cycles of predication and inference, because the function of syntax is precisely to infer relationships and represent them as predications. Other constraints are less implicit, artificial and subject to evolution with shifting fashions or individual predilections, for instance, the structures of the periodic sentence, or the six-part Ciceronian oration, or the form of a business letter. Such constraints may broadly be called generic: they offer a reassuring overview of what some finished discourse will look like, thereby enabling the more confident exercise of other, local and immediate strategies as the writing proceeds. Still other constraints affect writing from without, for instance, the interaction between a controlling sense of purpose and one's estimate of the needs and expectations of some intended reader. This rhetorical sensitivity importantly influences choices about what to say and where and how to say it, though it does not predict those choices as restrictively as do the conventions of syntax. Many additional constraints, both intrihsic and extrinsic, could be described; But I wish only to be illustrative here, not comprehensive, since my present focus is on a relationship between the idea of "constraint" and the idea of coherence.

It is important to be precise about what constraints do. I do not want to say carelessly that they "regulate" the writing process, for this would introduce a problematic conception of writing-in-itself as

a separable behavior that exists prior to any constraint. How can we describe verbal expression apart from the phonological, syntactic, or semantic conventions that cause it to be what it is? Instead, let us say that the network of interrelated constraints serves to characterize writing as a process and accounts for its features. If we press further and ask, "what is it then that is constrained?," we shall have to answer "the same thing that is constrained by the conventions governing painting or dance or any other symbolic behavior, namely, the semiological and structurating capacities that make us human." At this point, we are in the position of the physicist who seeks the fundamental materiality of things: just as the physicist "knows" elementary particles through their effects rather than "in themselves," so we know the processes of thinking and feeling and imagining by their dramatization in different media. The physicist will likely concede the futility of searching "beneath" models for the primary experience they imply, and we might sensibly do likewise.

A more interesting question is what happens when these human capacities to think and feel and imagine are manifested as writing. That is, how are they shaped within the constraints of composition? Following the insights of my colleague, A.D. VanNostrand ("The Inference Construct: A Model of the Writing Process," ADE Bulletin, May, 1978), I would argue that two elementary activities, in a reciprocal relationship, underlie the generation of discourse. The first of them is the process of retrieving information; the second is making assertions about that information. I would only disagree with VanNostrand in the suggestion that the two activities are in themselves "natural" rather than conventional behaviors and that they function prior to the imposition of constraints, which are only relevant subsequently to satisfy the needs of communication. I suggest, rather, that both activities lie within the →

field of compositional constraints because they are governed by, and could not occur without, the rules of syntax. The application of grammatical conventions to the welter of experience causes the perception of discrete bits, which become "information," and also enables the interconnection of those bits within the paradigmatic and syntagmatic structures of assertions. In other words, language decomposes the world in order to recompose it according to its own laws. Given the perception of experiential multiplicity, itself a fiction sustained by the action of grammar, the natural tendency of the composing mind is to infer order, which reduces the multiplicity to unity. The need to discover a coherence amidst diverse information causes the stating of assertions and thereby initiates the process of composing.

Note, however, that these two activities, retrieving information and stating assertions, depend not only on syntactic constraints but on the whole system of conventions that make up the writing process. They are elementary behaviors in the shaping of discourse, but they do not work in isolation or without motive; they do not come first in the chronology of composing. The writer's purpose, for example, an extrinsic constraint to which I referred earlier, serves to determine the kind of information relevant to a given occasion; hence, some degree of self-consciousness about purpose must precede the retrieval of useful materials with which to begin making assertions. Other, chiefly generic constraints operate to predict acceptable relationships between bits of information or between any two assertions. For instance, Wordsworth is allowed to assert in a poem that "the child is father of the man," but the same assertion would be unacceptable in a biology textbook. Presumably, then, an awareness of what can be tolerated as fact or fiction, as useful or

trivial, as generically appropriate or not, must also in some sense precede the shaping of statements. In any case, the chronological order in which constraints operate is less important than the fact that they all work together to generate discourse, that the action of any one entails the rest in an interdependent system.

Granting this perspective, let us return to the reciprocal connection between retrieving information and making assertions. Any one assertion aims simply to state relationships among pieces of information, following the rules of syntax. Writers infer these relationships according to what they find valuable or important or suggestive in their materials. Of course, composing seldom stops at a single sentence. Typically, the writer fashions consecutive statements in order to come to terms with a range of ideas and insights that is too broad or complex to be adequately integrated all at once. An individual assertion is limited in scope; it neither exhausts all the bits of information that gave rise to it nor satisfies by itself the writer's need to achieve the broadest relevant understanding of their significance. Its assimilation is always partial, and its formulation therefore invariably raises questions. The questions may concern its relationship to assertions preceding, or its implications for others to follow, or simply the clarity or adequacy of its own expression. Whatever their focus, they give rise to new information which in turn stimulates new inferences. In this way, a pattern expands gradually, as additional assertions, necessitated by the perception of unassimilated insights, are joined to an evolving sequence. The process continues until all the pertinent questions have been answered within the rhetorical limits of the writer's purpose.

We are almost, but not quite, ready to relate the idea of coherence

to this activity of making repeated inferences in order to generate sequences of assertions. One problem remains and one essential constraint still must be introduced. The problem is that this inferential activity has no necessary boundaries: any range of information could support an infinite number of assertions; the last paragraph of any discourse could easily become the first paragraph of another; any statement can give rise to an infinity of other statements, which are related to it through more and more distant, less and less functional avenues of association. The consequence for a writer, in the absence of some control, might be either an aimlessness derived from the temptation to sample diverse possibilities at random or, more seriously, frustration and even paralysis in the face of so many alternatives. (Writing teachers recognize these consequences in radically disorganized discourse on one hand or writer's block on the other.) Laurence Sterne's wonderful novel, Tristram Shandy, perfectly demonstrates the incoherence that results from random inferential activity. Tristram's writing expands energetically in myriad directions but ultimately fails to accomplish its stated purpose, which was to articulate and render coherent his own life history. Tristram associates freely, not rigorously, and is finally tyrannized by the flood of unintegrated experience that competes for equal attention at the close of each sentence. His discourse is hopelessly out of control.

What is lacking in his text, or rather what Sterne intentionally disengages to serve a subtler artistic purpose, is the constraint of entailment. Viewed from the standpoint of process, entailment represents an intuition that something ought to follow from what has preceded, in light of all the rhetorical circumstances surrounding the discourse. Viewed from the standpoint of product, it describes a pattern of

interrelated assertions self-evidently declaring their integrity as a line of reasoning. While the inference process moves writing forward, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, the sense of entailment principally enables coherence by insuring that writer and reader alike perceive the logic of interconnection that animates the discourse. This logic is not restricted to such transactional modes as analysis or argument, for descriptive and narrative writing, even poetry and other purely expressive modes, equally demonstrate some species of entailment: that is, they all make assertions and interrelate them to reveal connections perceived in the thoughts, images, and experiences they convey.

What the sense of entailment ordinarily contributes to the process of making inferences is a pragmatic, if not absolutely rigorous, definition of associational proximity, the boundaries of relevant inferential action within the limits of a writer's intention. "What follows" at any point in an evolving discourse depends on an awareness of what may be best suited to achieving the general or specific purposes of the writing; that awareness results from perceiving the relationship between one's intentions and the partly elaborated context that has already begun to work toward their satisfaction. Entailment suggests the appropriate possibilities that grow out of a comparison between what the writer wishes to say and what has been said already up to the point of the next assertion. Naturally, there are many more possibilities, many more options to pursue, at the start of a discourse than later: there is at once more pure potential at this stage and also more pressure to realize it, more difficulty in deciding what to say first. As the writing proceeds, the choices grow more restricted and are, to that extent, easier to make. The range of plausible inferences is diminished and the sense of entailment

is more sharply focused. Hence, the end of a discourse often seems to arise out of necessities in the writing itself.

We can now relate the idea of coherence to the constraints that define the process of writing. Coherence results from the strategic manipulation of constraints as it is manifested in the effort to devise plausible sequences of assertions. We recognize the coherence of a discourse when we perceive the force of its entailments, when the logic of its interconnected statements appears self-evident. But having said this, it is important to state more explicitly the overriding value of the insight we started with: Henry Miller's observation that all coherences are tentative and that the composing process is richer than its products. What has been described in the theory of constraints is, from one point of view, an orderly procedure for generating multiple connections among things, or from another point of view, a kind of artifice that enables certain connections to be displayed as texts. Useful implications follow from both perspectives, but there is more vitality in the first than in the second. The coherence of any one pattern of assertions, which is the achievement of artifice, conveys a believable fiction about the validity of its interrelationships. But the measure of its inadequacy resides in the many possibilities that have been strategically eliminated to preserve intellectual, imaginative, and structural consistencies. Unwritten texts, exploding with potential, inhabit the spaces between assertions and threaten to sabotage the discourse. The ability to discover new connections holds a promise that keeps every writer looking beyond previous sentences and previous ways of seeing things. In the repudiation of earlier statements lie the insights which will re-energize the process of stating inferences and conceiving new entailments. What we celebrate in any

achieved coherence, therefore, is its implicit suggestion of still broader patterns of interrelationship to be explored: for it is in the creative rewriting of past discourse that we witness the progress of learning; and it is the progress of learning that insures our individual growth and the perpetuation of our culture.